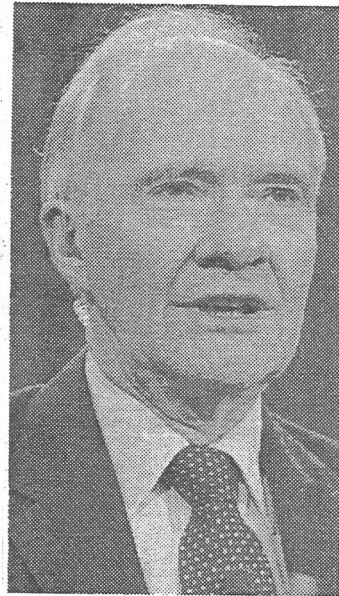


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U.S. Had Covert Plan To Oust Iraq's Saddam, Bush Adviser Asserts

Effort to Remove Leader Came 'Pretty Close'



BRENT SCOWCROFT
... assassination ban was obeyed

By Don Oberdorfer
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Bush administration adopted a covert action plan to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power but was careful not to violate the longstanding ban on attempting to assassinate a foreign leader, presidential national security adviser Brent Scowcroft said yesterday.

Scowcroft, in a valedictory meeting with Washington Post editors and reporters, said the removal of Saddam was never "a major objective" of U.S. policy in Iraq, although he added that "we'd love to see him gone, because he's a particularly vicious character."

As Scowcroft portrayed it, administration policy both before and since Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait was centered more on balancing the respective threats posed by Iran and Iraq than is usually portrayed.

The security adviser said an effort to oust Saddam came "pretty close" last summer and was foiled only because the Iraqi leader "has one of the most efficient security systems in the world." He said emphatically, however, that this was not a U.S. effort.

An official who asked not to be quoted by name said the administration provided assurance to Iraqi plotters that they would receive U.S. support if they succeeded. But he said Washington had not provided military, logistical or financial support to the plot.

Iraqi emigres said last summer that a coup attempt against Saddam was mounted late in June but foundered in a clash with loyalist forces. This was followed by reports of an extensive purge within top ranks of the Iraqi military.

Scowcroft gave no details of the plot against Saddam but did suggest that it involved the Iraqi military. "If it's done, it's going to be done from the inside and probably [from] within the army," the former U.S. Air Force general said.

A U.S. executive order, issued in 1976 by President Gerald R. Ford and still in force, forbids any person employed by or acting for the U.S. government to "engage in, or con-

spire to engage in, assassination" of a foreign leader.

Scowcroft said the administration has adhered closely to a Justice Department opinion on the order issued in 1989 in connection with the U.S. drive to arrest Panamanian leader Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Doing something that could change a foreign government does not breach the anti-assassination order "if you do it the right way," Scowcroft said.

According to Scowcroft, U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf since early in the Reagan administration has been "to maintain a balance" between Iran and Iraq, neighboring powers which fought one another during most of the 1980s.

When it appeared early in the 1980s that Iran might win, there was "a sharp tilt" by the United States toward Iraq, Scowcroft said. After Iraq invaded Kuwait and thus threatened to be the dominant power, U.S. and allied military action sought to restore the balance by opposing Iraq, he added.

Scowcroft was notably cool in his comments about Iran as well as Iraq, saying that the Tehran government is "potentially the bigger problem" and that its recent actions have been "more negative" than anticipated.

Regarding another foreign policy hot spot, Scowcroft said the U.S. military has begun its withdrawal from Somalia and that, according to present plans, most U.S. forces should be out in "about another month."

The main hurdle to steady withdrawal of U.S. forces is U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who is "dragging his feet" on creating a U.N. force to replace the American troops, according to Scowcroft.

A central unresolved issue is the rules of engagement for the successor U.N. force, which should be authorized to take a more aggressive military role than the typical international peacekeeping force, Scowcroft said.

He added that the successor force should actively seek to seize the arms of Somali factions and freelance fighters, a role he said is

not appropriate for American troops.

Scowcroft defended the administration's refusal to send U.S. troops into Bosnia-Herzegovina, comparing the difficulties of launching a military operation there with those faced by U.S. forces in Vietnam. He cited a NATO estimate that it would take 100,000 ground troops merely to open and maintain the roads from the Adriatic port of Split to the besieged Bosnian capital of Sarajevo.

He estimated it would require 300,000 to 500,000 troops to make sure relief aid is delivered to all of Bosnia.

"Bosnia is contained" in a geopolitical sense, Scowcroft said, but if the fighting spreads to the Serbian province of Kosovo or independent Macedonia, the conflict would become "a big international crisis" requiring the involvement of major powers.

Even in this event, he said, it is unlikely that the United States would send ground troops but could use U.S. airpower to punish aggressor factions or nations.

The Bosnian Serbs, including well-armed elements of the former Yugoslav army, have achieved their military objectives in Bosnia "except for a few pockets" of Muslim resistance, according to Scowcroft. Being "pretty well satisfied" with the existing situation in Bosnia, "they could be talked into stopping" and accepting a settlement of the war, he said.

However, it is unlikely that such a deal would be acceptable to Bosnia Muslims, who have lost much territory, Scowcroft said.

Staff writer R. Jeffrey Smith contributed to this report.